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ABSTRACT

Cooperative learning and heterogeneous ability grouping meet many of the goals of middle grade education while avoiding the discriminatory effects of tracking and homogeneous grouping. Poor and minority students are overrepresented in lower track classes, and are, therefore, more likely to be denied equal access to education. Arguments in favor of tracking and ability grouping include the following: (1) students learn better; (2) slower students do not have to compete with their brighter peers; (3) placement is accurate and fair; and (4) teachers find heterogeneous groups are easier to teach. Arguments against tracking and ability grouping include the following: (1) no group of students has been found to benefit consistently; (2) isolation from better students does not help the academic self-concept of those placed in lower ability groups or tracks; (3) standardized placement tests are not objective since they are designed to serve the needs of the tracking system; and (4) the more experience that teachers gain with heterogeneous grouping, the better they like it. Tracking and ability grouping have also been found to be a major force for resegregation of supposedly integrated schools. Cooperative learning is the most frequently recommended model for mixed ability grouping. Implementation of heterogeneously grouped classroom techniques requires inservice training for teachers and administrative support. Thirty-four footnotes are included. (FMW)

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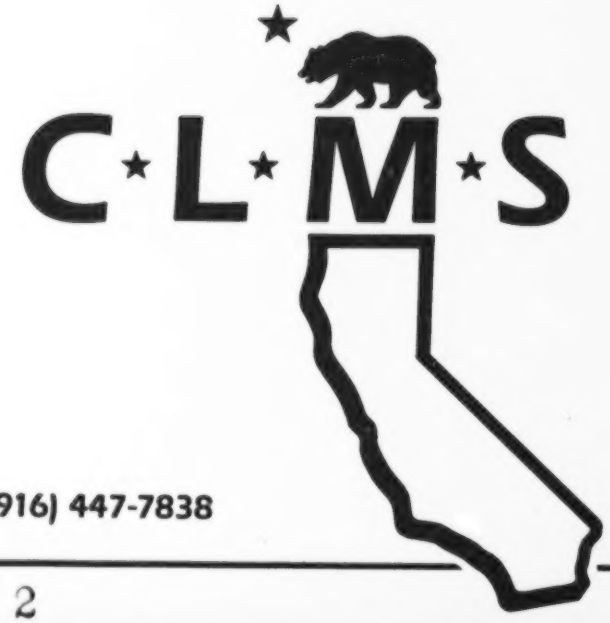
Practitioner's Monograph #2:

EQUAL ACCESS TO EDUCATION:

ALTERNATIVES TO

TRACKING AND ABILITY GROUPING



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by

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November, 1988

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The Call to Abolish Tracking and Ability Grouping

Tracking and homogeneous ability grouping are longstanding instructional practices in our schools. Most secondary schools track students into distinct curriculum paths, often labeled "honors," "college preparatory," "general," and "vocational"; other schools assign students to "high," "average," and "low" ability versions of core classes; some schools do both.

Yet Caught in the Middle, the 1987 report of the California Task Force on Middle Grade Education calls for change:

> Heterogeneous grouping practices should be be normative in middle grade classrooms. If permanent or semipermanent "ability" grouping or tracking occurs for all or most of a student's school day, substantial harm can result. . . . No student shall be tracked in grades 6, 7, and 8 according to ethnicity, gender, general ability, primary language, or handicap.[1]

Why does a state report reject as "harmful" these commonly accepted instructional practices? Because substantial recent research indicates that tracked and ability-grouped classes too frequently deliver different course content and instructional quality to students, with lower track students receiving less, on practically all measures. Poor and minority students are overrepresented in lower track classes and are, therefore, more likely to be shortchanged on educational quality. This defies the concepts of core curriculum, equal access to education, and preparation for the widest possible options in high school: three central recommendations of Caught in the Middle.

This does not mean that flexible, temporary skill groups cannot be used to meet certain instructional needs. What research condemns is the value-laden, limiting, and usually permanent labeling of students through early estimates of their academic ability. It often begins in Grade 1 as "fast" or

"slow" reading group placement, under innocent names like "redbirds" and "bluebirds," but it can soon become a "high," "average," or "low" ability label that determines a student's curriculum track and course options through grade 12--provided, of course, that the lower track student makes it to grade 12. A number do not.

Existing tracking and ability grouping systems are rigid. Students seldom change their ability or track label after grade 3[2]. The system itself inhibits students from moving: tracked courses keep to their own sequences, seldom providing the content prerequisites for other tracks.[3]

Typical of the negative research on tracking and ability grouping is Jeannie Oakes' major study, Keeping Track: How Schools Structure Inequality. This study is based on observations of almost 300 English and mathematics classes in 25 secondary schools, conducted as part of the massive A Study of Schooling. While most of the findings quoted here are from Oakes, they are consistent with the recent findings of many other researchers.

Arguments in Favor of Tracking and Ability Grouping

Oakes identifies four major arguments educators use to support ability grouping and tracking:

- Students learn better in homogeneous groups, with other students who have the same academic needs and capabilities: bright students are not held back by the less able; and grouping slower students together makes instructional assistance more efficient.
- In ability groups, slower students do not have to compete with their brighter peers. This saves them from continual academic failure, frustration, and loss of self esteem.
- Student track placement is accurate and fair, based on student test performance and on their own future educational/vocational needs.

- Teachers find homogeneous groups easier to teach. They can give more attention to individual needs, when the total class ability span is not so great.[4]

Arguments Against Tracking and Ability Grouping

Oakes discredits each of the above arguments, affirming that--in the first place--the homogeneous groups now found in schools are not very homogeneous at all. In particular, the lower track receives students who lack skills or who lack aptitude or who have attendance or behavior problems. These are hardly homogeneous learning needs that can be advantageously grouped for common instruction.[5] In all track levels, students may be selected because they fall within a narrow test score band, but that says little about their individual interests, learning styles, or emotional needs--all of which will greatly affect their behavior and performance in class.

Against the argument that students learn better with "their own kind," Oakes concludes that:

> we have virtually mountains of research evidence indicating that homogeneous grouping doesn't consistently help anyone learn better. Over the past sixty years, hundreds of studies have been conducted . . . The results differ in certain specifics, but one conclusion emerges clearly: no group of students has been found to benefit consistently from being in a homogeneous group.[6]

Advocates of homogeneous classes for the gifted argue that top students do benefit from ability grouping. Such research conclusions do occur, as in a recent Pennsylvania study finding that homogeneous ability grouping in mathematics benefited sixth grade middle schoolers of high social background.[7]

Some writers dismiss this "gifted" research as "usually out of date or flawed methodologically."[8] Others find that beneficial effects are limited to students on the borderline between average and high ability, who are given a "boost" through placement in a more advanced class.[9] Still others suggest

that high ability students can do well anywhere; and, if they benefit from tracking, it may be because the system gives them the best of everything the school has to offer, even as it shortchanges lower track students.

On the second argument, it has been found that isolation from better students does not help the academic self concept of those placed in lower ability groups or tracks. Lower track students have more negative self perceptions and lower educational aspirations. (That this results from track placement is confirmed by studies controlling for socioeconomic status and IQ.) Lower track students participate less in extracurricular activities, are more alienated from school, misbehave more in class, are more delinquent outside of school, and have a higher dropout rate.[10]

Track systems may isolate students. Tracked core courses may create scheduling conflicts, so that students of different tracks do not even meet often in their untracked classes, such as physical education.[11] It has been observed that students tend to segregate themselves by track even outside of class and to stereotype the students of other tracks.[12]

In relation to the third argument, Mitchell, Haycock, and Navarro question the objectivity of standardized student placement tests, since these tests were designed to serve the needs of the tracking model itself: to spread students along a pre-defined band by their performance on a narrow set of testable skills.[13]

It is true that some tracking--usually high school curriculum selection: academic, vocational, general--is voluntary. But Oakes argues that parent/student choice in this matter is largely guided by test scores, past placements, and academic self concepts formed under years of tracking and ability grouping; before being offered a choice, students have essentially been told by the system which track to choose. In any case, in Oakes' study

sample, the academic/vocational track choice did not exist in any middle grade school, and ability group placement was accomplished without parent or student input.[14]

Also detracting from the fairness of student placement is the rather clandestine nature of the process: few schools in Oakes' sample had written policies; their track assignment criteria were seldom open and understood.[15]

The final argument--that homogeneous classes are easier to teach--seems to be a universal perception among educators. This is hardly surprising, since this is how teachers are used to teaching: it has, for decades, been the predominant instructional model in American schools. Heterogeneous grouping does appear difficult to teachers untrained and inexperienced in its use. But British research indicates that the more experience teachers gain with heterogeneous instruction, the more advantages they see in it.[16]

Whatever teachers' level of comfort with ability grouping, their assertion that it permits varied attention to individual needs does not hold up to research, which indicates that teachers do not often alter their teaching styles to meet student abilities.[17]

Tracking and Unequal Access to Education

Findings that track systems lower student self concept and do not promote better teaching are enough to cause concern, but these are far from the worst findings against tracking and ability grouping. Many researchers now agree that these practices are discriminatory and a prime cause of unequal education. Poor and minority students are overrepresented in the lower tracks.[18] These are the students most likely to be publicly labeled "slow" or "remedial" or, as Oakes points out, "when people are being less careful--dummies, sweathogs, or yahoos."[19]

When Cook, Eyler, and Ward examined within-school resegregation in

desegregated schools, they concluded that ability grouping and tracking were "a major force for resegregation."[20] They also found evidence that educators' attitudes toward integration correlate with use of tracking and rigid ability grouping, suggesting that, "while the use of tracking and grouping is an approach to dealing with diversity that antedates desegregation, there is reason to believe that its resegregative effects are not entirely incidental."[21]

Oakes refers frequently to the hypothesis of Bowles and Gintis that the differential treatment afforded students by instructional track is both a reflection of society's class structure and a means of socializing students into that structure, where the middle and upper classes (often white) have more status and receive better treatment than the lower classes, who are poor and often from minority groups.[22]

More than one study has confirmed the differential treatment secondary students receive in ability-tracked classes. The California High School Curriculum Study: Paths Through High School concludes:

> The information collected during the study conveys a picture of students who may attend the same school but who come away with very different educational experiences. . . . The high school diploma does not represent a "core curriculum," even in the most general sense, of knowledge studied or learned. On the contrary, the education students receive is, in large part, determined by the track to which they are assigned when they enter high school.[23]

Jeannie Oakes devotes the central chapters of Keeping Track to her findings on differential education across tracks. On practically all measures, she found that high track (HT) classes provide a more desirable education than do low track (LT) classes. Middle or "average" classes tend to be more like high track classes, leaving LT classes, where poor and minority students are more likely to be found, at a distinct educational disadvantage.

Oakes found that, among other things, HT classes:

- o offer "high-status" knowledge useful for college (in English, for example, Shakespeare, instead of the "young adult fiction" used in LT classes);
- o require more advanced academic skills (e.g., essay writing and library research, instead of workbook exercises);
- o emphasize analysis and higher order thinking, instead of rote memory or comprehension tasks;
- o encourage student independence and initiative (as opposed to LT classes, where teachers are more inclined to value student conformity and compliance);
- o show more time-on-task (Oakes estimates that the difference, over six secondary school years, would amount to 240 hours or 12 college credits, if the LT student took a full six years of English and math and had high attendance--which is doubtful);
- o expect double or triple the homework, thus increasing the learning time differential with LT classes;
- o elicit more effective teaching behaviors: clarity, variability, enthusiasm, task orientation, lack of strong criticism; and
- o provide a better classroom environment, with friendlier, more helpful student/teacher and peer relationships.[24]

Heterogeneous classes were found to be more like high or average classes; that is, they are taught to the highest common denominator--not to the lowest, as is often assumed. Therefore, high ability students do well in heterogeneous settings, and lower ability students thrive on the improved conditions of a classroom taught on the high/average model.[25]

Oakes concludes:

> The view of schools as meritocratic institutions where, regardless of race or class, those students with the "right stuff" are given a neutral environment where they can rise to the top is called into question by our findings. Everywhere we turn we see the likelihood of in-school barriers to upward mobility for capable poor and minority students.[26]

Alternatives to Tracking: Basic Principles

Many teachers who are happy with ability grouping will not be eager to change. Heterogeneous grouping does seem to demand more of teachers: even good classroom managers may be temporarily overwhelmed by an extremely heterogeneous class (up to 10 grade levels of ability); poor classroom managers seem to be permanently overwhelmed by such a class.[27] Clearly, some teachers will need incentives, encouragement, time, and training to move toward hetereogeneous instruction.

In an article for the National Education Association,[28] Jeannie Oakes suggests some principles on which to design alternatives to tracking:

- Create a new conception of ability; abandon the traditional notion that academic ability and social destiny are fixed in early childhood and that some students simply cannot go far. (Teachers and administrators will need to examine their attitudes toward students and be wary of the nonverbal messages they send. Research indicates that teachers can unconsciously treat low achieving students differently: calling on them less often, smiling and making eye contact less frequently, providing less feedback, and demanding less work from them.[29])
- Develop a curriculum rich with meaning. When students can grasp at the meaning of relevant, real-life content, they can more easily master needed skills. (Caught in the Middle advocates such a curriculum, organized by content or themes, rather than skill

sequences.)

- Use "interactive classroom organization" with active learning, flexible student work groups, projects that draw on many student skills, and criterion-referenced evaluation. (These are also features advocated by Caught in the Middle.)

In an article entitled, "Beyond Ability Grouping," Margaret Dawson offers more research-based suggestions, such as:

- Base instruction on moderately heterogeneous classes with a preponderance of high and middle ability learners. Use ability grouping in limited, temporary situations for skills instruction in subjects like reading and math.
- Within classes, use small, heterogeneous learning groups to allow students to practice skills and solve problems. Whole class instruction may be used for presenting information.
- Re-assess and re-group students frequently.
- Also form groups on criteria other than ability, for example, group students on occassion by their topic interests.[30]

Alternatives to Tracking: Cooperative Learning and Other Models

Many techniques for accommodating a wide ability range in a single classroom have been developed: individualized instruction, continuous progress plans, learning centers, multi-text thematic units. Some teachers may have experience with or preferences for one or more of these models. Such individualized models do require extensive teacher planning, but for mixed ability classes, they offer a distinct advantage over traditional whole-group instruction. In whole-class instruction, all students compete for grades on a single task. Students are quick to perceive relative abilities and form an

academic "pecking order," with the slowest students quite clearly on the bottom. In a more individualized class, where students often work on different tasks and grading is less competitive, differences in ability are less easily discerned and "status" problems less likely to develop.[31]

Of all the models suggested for mixed ability classes, cooperative learning seems most frequently recommended.

Cooperative learning entails the creation of small, heterogeneous student teams that work on research, discovery, problem solving, skills practice, or other learning projects. All team members are needed to accomplish the task: everyone contributes; no one dominates. Students are graded individually, so that no one "freeloads" on the group's work. In their small teams, students get more chances to talk, to listen, to brainstorm, and to receive feedback than would be possible in whole-class instruction.

To implement cooperative learning students must first be taught the skills of group process and group work. These teamwork skills are socially valuable: they are often taught these days to business executives. Teams manage their own work and problems, thus gaining learning independence. The teacher takes a facilitative role, while retaining the role of information-giver during whole-class instruction.

Cooperative learning meets many of the goals for middle grade education set by Caught in the Middle: it facilitates heterogeneous grouping, project-centered instruction, access of all students to the core curriculum, active learning, and a healthy channeling of the peer influence so critical to this age group. Caught in the Middle specifically recommends:

> Both cooperative learning and peer and cross-age tutoring should be integral components of middle grade classroom instruction. . . . These instructional strategies are cost-effective, increase learning, and are directly consistent with the middle grade philosophy which stresses a personal concern for all students.[32]

Cooperative learning has been extensively researched, and its success as

an academic and social learning device is well-documented, for students of all ages and ability levels. It is a proven tool for enhancing intergroup relations, an important consideration with California's multiethnic school population.[33]

Leaders in the cooperative learning field include Robert Slavin of Johns Hopkins University, David and Roger Johnson of the University of Minnesota, and Spencer Kagan of the University of California at Riverside.

Starting to Move toward Heterogeneous Grouping

With inservice training, time, and administrative support, those teachers who have not already done so can begin using cooperative learning, peer tutoring, individualized instruction, or other classroom techniques that support heterogeneous learning needs.

Making a schoolwide transition out of ability-tracked course sequences will require broader planning. Heterogeneous re-grouping of students may fall into place as other recommendations of Caught in the Middle are implemented. For example, creation of a common core curriculum will necessitate the re-design of ability-level classes. If a house plan is chosen to scale down a large school, students may be assigned to houses in such a way that each house reflects the diversity of the whole student body.

Middle schools are not usually faced with the academic/vocational curriculum split found in high schools, but lower track courses will have to be abolished, or restructured to give students the prerequisites for a wider curriculum choice in grade 9, as required by Caught in the Middle. (At present, few lower track classes provide the content students need to later take a high track class, e.g., "basic" math does not prepare students for Algebra. Thus students are effectively trapped in the lower tracks and many

high school curriculum choices are closed to them.)

It would be advantageous to work with feeder elementary schools to abolish ability grouping there, so that students do not reach the middle grades with several years' exposure to the "low track = low self esteem" syndrome. But in the meantime, middle grade educators will have to deal with students already labeled "slow."

As steps toward diminishing the track levels, lower track students might be actively recruited into higher track classes and, once there, given special support and tutoring to succeed. Two ability levels in a subject might be compressed into one team-taught class--allowing both students and teachers to interact with the people of another track, after years of organizational separation.

The key will be in changing attitudes; in truly enacting the belief that all students can do the work, when given appropriate instruction and assistance. The "Pygmalion in the Classroom" research indicates that students thrive when their teachers believe they are capable. Mitchell, Haycock, and Navarro cite a number of California schools that are reaping good results from treating their students this way. For example:

- Claremont Middle School in Oakland gives all its students textbooks above their grade level. Since it began this practice, test scores and self esteem have soared.
- San Diego County's AVID program and Los Angeles' Phineas Banning College Core Curriculum provide special support and encouragement to students who traditionally would not take a college preparatory curriculum.
- Garfield High School, in Los Angeles, actively recruits Latino students into advanced placement mathematics. This effort was recently celebrated in the feature film, Stand and Deliver.[34]

These schools are telling their students--including their poor and minority students--that they expect them to succeed at challenging coursework. Traditional tracking and ability group systems give the opposite message: that some students have only limited capabilities and, if you accept Bowles and Gintis' hypothesis, that the role of the school is to train each student to his or her "place" in life--as determined, in part, by social class, home language, and skin color. If we really believe in equal educational opportunity, we should not be giving children this message.

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